

The Whole No Longer Lives At All: Nietzsche on the Decadence of Individuals and Cultures

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I. Introduction

“Nothing has preoccupied me more profoundly than the problem of decadence,” Nietzsche writes in his preface to *The Case of Wagner*, “‘Good and evil’ is merely a variation of that problem.” Given that Nietzsche announces in 1888, the final year of his active life, that the problem of decadence is the one that has concerned him more deeply than any other, it is a bit surprising that the issue has received relatively scant attention in the anglophone secondary literature on Nietzsche.¹ Then again, maybe this neglect is not so surprising: Perhaps “decadence” is thought by many interpreters to be nothing more than a vague term of abuse, something too overripe and parochially *fin de siècle* to find a central place in any rigorous philosophical reconstruction of Nietzsche’s views.² (Decadence is not, to say the least, the centerpiece of a burgeoning contemporary philosophical research program...) Or perhaps Nietzsche’s concern with decadence is written off as the peculiar obsession of a mind descending into madness, and thus not worthy of serious attention.³ Few scholars—if they discuss decadence at all—take Nietzsche at his word and ascribe to it the central importance that he does. Like some of Nietzsche’s more embarrassing forays into physiological speculation, or his frequent and vituperative expressions of misogyny, his constant talk of decadence may seem something to be soft-pedaled.⁴

But this failure to give decadence its due is a mistake. For far from being a peripheral issue, the concept of decadence is of crucial importance in understanding Nietzsche’s more recognizably “philosophical” concerns in ethics and social philosophy. He takes decadence to be

the looming threat that individuals and whole cultures face, after all. Accordingly, it is essential for an interpretation of Nietzsche to try to work out just what decadence involves in the case of both individuals and cultures.

My aim in this paper is to reconstruct what Nietzsche means by “decadence.” In the technical sense in which he uses this term, it is not simply an exotic synonym for “bad,” nor is it just Nietzsche’s idiosyncratic way of expressing his distaste for forms of life that he finds repellent. The term instead describes a kind of structural failing in human individuals and cultures—a failing that he takes to be the main obstacle to their flourishing.

II. Nietzsche’s Concept of Decadence

Let’s begin by discussing the term “decadence” itself. For many it will conjure up ideas of a dissolute way of living— one of extreme luxuriousness and licentiousness in food, dress, and sexual practice—of fattened sybarites, swaddled in silk and gorging themselves to the point of gout, with many willing concubines at their feet. Or it will evoke images of hypersensitive, neurasthenic aesthetes, deprived of daylight and taking all their sustenance from aesthetic experience. Of late, the term has sometimes come to have milder, more positive connotations—mothers pampering themselves with “decadent” bubble baths and chocolate truffles when they need a respite from their shrieking children—indulgent, yes, but, according to Madison Avenue, basically a harmless treat. Yet we must put these caricatures aside if we are to understand the specific sense that Nietzsche gives to the term “decadence.” In the spirit of many 19th and early 20th century thinkers, he regards decadence, not as a weekend extravagance, but as a serious and destructive flaw on the personal and the social level. And this weakness, by Nietzsche’s lights, needn’t consist in a taste for the pleasures of the flesh; almost always, in fact, it involves in a

fanatical ascetic repudiation of these sorts of sensuous delights. This repudiation, along with other decadent attitudes and behaviors, are, though, really *symptoms* of a more fundamental problem. As I shall try to make clear in what follows, for Nietzsche decadence is literally a kind of dis-order – that is, a lack of cohesive order – within the individual or the culture. It is this disorder that is to blame for the symptoms of decadence that Nietzsche identifies.

In his more rashly scientific moods, Nietzsche describes the decadence of individuals as a kind of organically-conditioned physiological degeneration of the human species. (Thus a “disorder” in the more familiar sense as well...) Because of this degeneration of the human type (TI, “Errors,” 2 and “Skirmishes,” 37), or as the result of various debilities of the “nerves” (AC, 51 and CW, 5), humans come to manifest various symptoms of decadence, Nietzsche supposes.⁵ Thus they come do things of a self-destructive stripe: they lacerate themselves; they condemn this sublunary world; they disdain their “lower” sexual and animal nature; they devote their lives to the worship of non-entities (the eternal Forms, God), they identify their “true” self with a non-entity (an eternal soul), and so on. These sickly individual decadents, Nietzsche thinks, inexorably go on to spawn decadent religions, philosophies, and works of art, symptomatic and expressive of their decadence.⁶ These spiritual, intellectual, and artistic expressions of decadence in turn prove irresistibly attractive to other decadents. Like diabetics attracted to a bake sale or hypertensives drawn to salty snacks, decadents, as the result of their condition, come to crave what is worst for them.⁷ It is *because* someone is decadent that Wagner’s operas or Christianity appeals to him. And going to *Parsifal*, or to church, only serves to make the basic problem worse.⁸

From the way that Nietzsche characterizes things, it may then seem that decadence in the case of individuals is something akin to a medical condition.⁹ But though it is importantly similar

to a medical condition—maybe even is one—it is important to remember that Nietzsche’s account of what individual decadence involves is independent of his biological speculations. Whether or not one agrees with the highly questionable etiology of decadence that Nietzsche gives (that it is the result of physiological degeneration), we can still see it as a certain kind of flaw, which can afflict individuals and cultures. It is on characterizing this flaw that I focus in this chapter. As I argue in the next section, Nietzsche conceives of decadence as, at core, a particular kind of *structural* failing. In sections IV and V, I will go on to explain what this structural problem amounts to in cases of individual and cultural decadence.

III. Decadence as Dis-order

One of the best and most famous—if rather opaque—characterizations of decadence that we get in Nietzsche’s works comes by way of an analogy to the arts. “Every style” of decadence, he thinks, resembles that of the decadent work of literature.¹⁰ He writes:

I dwell this time only on the question of style¹¹— What is the sign of every *literary decadence*? That life no longer dwells in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole. But this is the simile [*Gleichniss*] of every style of *decadence*: every time, the anarchy of atoms, the disgregation [*Disgregation*]¹² of the will, “freedom of the individual,” to use moral terms—expanded into a political theory, “*equal rights for all.*” Life, *equal vitality*, the vibration and exuberance of life pushed back into the smallest forms; the rest, *poor* in life. Everywhere paralysis [*Lähmung*], hardship [*Mühsal*], torpidity [*Erstarrung*] or hostility [*Feindschaft*] and chaos: both more and more obvious the higher one ascends in forms of organization. The whole no longer lives at all: it is composite [*zusammengesetzt*], calculated, artificial, and artifact. (CW, 7)¹³

This account of the structural failing in cases of decadence is highly analogical. I'll try to make it more concrete with a case study in the next section. But I want to lay out the overall framework first, so that we can interpret the case study by means of it.

Decadence, on Nietzsche's view, would seem to involve a failure of integration at the level of the whole. This emphasis on integration is a recurrent theme in his work, and a recurrent theme in the philosophical tradition more generally: in order to flourish, someone or something must achieve a certain kind of unity.¹⁴ Perhaps in some trivial sense, whenever elements are put together, there is always a whole of some kind that they compose. But what Nietzsche means is that in cases of decadence, there is not an *integrated* whole. The whole, as it might be put, lacks "organic unity."¹⁵ This failure of unity, as Nietzsche suggests, is due, if not to an outright "anarchy of atoms," (a lack of any organization at all) then to the domination of the relevant whole by some part of it (a failure, thus, of cohesive integration)—the word, as he says, "becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning [*Sinn*] of the page." On the alternative to decadence that Nietzsche would seem to be implying, a whole is at its best when the parts work in unison.¹⁶

What would it be for an individual person or a cultural whole to be a cohesive unity? Using Nietzsche's characterization of "every style" of decadence from *The Case of Wagner*, we can take the general, if abstract, structural lessons we've gotten from this passage, and use them to try to make sense of the decadence of the individual. To this I will turn in the next section. We can, I shall argue, make sense of this decadence without needing to see it as literally a physiological problem. We needn't think that the muscles of decadents have softened, or that their "nerves" are in a state of disarray, or anything else absurdly 19th century.

IV. Individual Decadence as a Structural Failing

As we've seen, decadence is at core the result of a failure of integration.¹⁷ Looking to the decadent person bears out this lesson. In the decadent, there is, Nietzsche thinks, an underlying failure of integration to begin with—an internal disorder, an “anarchy of atoms,” in the terminology of CW, 7. Chaos reigns. In the midst of this anarchy, a drive (a part) comes to power, promising the salvation of the whole organism. (Think of the way a self-aggrandizing dictator, vowing to restore law and order, comes to power in situations of political chaos; this is roughly what Nietzsche thinks is happening in the person.) The decadent doesn't think his problem is a lack of integration in the self; he thinks it is something else.¹⁸ For the strategy of this domineering drive is to scapegoat some aspect of the decadent individual and to blame *that* for the decadent individual's “fallen” state. The “salvation” this drive proposes is to root out the allegedly offending element. The decadent individual thus comes to think along these lines: “If only I could eliminate all my ‘impure’ sexual impulses, then I could be closer to God.”¹⁹ “If only I could detach my soul from this copulating, urinating, and defecating animal body, I would attain perfect humanity.” “If only I could get past the temptations of this life, I would have the most extreme bliss with God in heaven.” And so on.

But there turns out to be a vicious cycle within the decadent person. This domination of the organism by a particular part (a given drive) happens as the organism's defense mechanism, in response to its preexisting decadence (the chaos or lack of order in the self). Yet in the very process of trying to correct for this decadence, it grows *even more* decadent. Whereas at first there was anarchy, now there is tyranny. One failure of integration is just exchanged for another,

one brand of decadence for another. In this respect, it is like the case of a smoker, who in order to quit never touches another cigarette, but to do so must cover his body in progressively more Nicoderm patches, so that he is getting even more nicotine than he was before. The “cure” perpetuates the underlying sickness—the addiction—in the very process of seeming to cure it.

In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche gives us an illustration of how this dynamic plays out in the case of Socrates. It will be helpful to dwell on this instructive example, for it is perhaps Nietzsche’s best account of decadence. Socrates’s instincts, Nietzsche thinks, are at first fundamentally in “anarchy” (TI, “Socrates,” 4, 9). (A sign, thus, of his underlying decadence—the failure of cohesive unity within the self). Instead of corralling his unruly instincts by integrating them into a cohesive unity, the organism Socrates, in reaction to this chaos, finds something to blame: ignorance. All bad things come from not knowing enough. Salvation comes in *rationality*:

...Socrates is the archetype of the theoretical optimist whose belief that the nature of things can be discovered leads him to attribute to knowledge and understanding the power of a panacea, and who understands error to be inherently evil. To penetrate to the ground of things and to separate true knowledge [*wahre Erkenntniss*] from illusion and error was considered by Socratic man to be the noblest, indeed the only truly human vocation, just as, from Socrates onwards, the mechanism of concepts, judgments, and conclusions was prized, above all other abilities, as the highest activity and the most admirable gift of nature (BT, 15)

Socrates, to this end, develops “a *hypertrophied* logical faculty” that affects to save him from ignorance, but really, Nietzsche thinks, just acts as a tyrant, keeping the rest of Socrates in subjugation. (TI, “Socrates,” 10).²⁰ Socrates doesn’t just stop with himself either. He tries to convince others in Athens that being “absurdly rational”(TI, “Socrates,” 10)—figuring out the essence of piety or justice—is eminently more important than any other human activity and indeed

is the only route to the good life.²¹ But as Nietzsche observes, “The fanaticism with which all Greek reflection throws itself upon rationality betrays a desperate situation” (*ibid.*): Socrates becomes fanatically enamored of reason and dialectics because he cannot cope with his own unruly impulses for sex and competition²², and the philosophical life of zealous rationality is just his reactive countermeasure.²³ Far from being his salvation, it just replaces one way of failing to be integrated with another. Socrates’ fight with decadence is fated from the start to be a losing battle, not only because he misidentifies the main target, but also, and more importantly, because his way of combatting decadence—allowing one part of himself—his rationality—to grow wildly out of proportion and to dominate the whole—drives him *even further* into decadence. This perverse mechanism that we see in Socrates exemplifies something true of decadents generally, Nietzsche writes:

It is a self-deception on the part of philosophers and moralists if they believe that they are extricating themselves from decadence when they merely wage war against it. Extrication lies beyond their strength: what they choose as a means, as salvation, is itself but another expression of decadence; they change its expression, but they do not get rid of the decadence itself. Socrates was a misunderstanding; *the whole improvement-morality, including the Christian, was a misunderstanding*. The most blinding daylight; rationality at any price; life, bright, cold, cautious, conscious, without instinct, in opposition to the instincts—all this too was mere disease, another disease, and by no means a return to “virtue,” to “health,” to happiness. To *have* to fight the instincts—that is the formula of decadence: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness equals instinct.²⁴ (TI, “Socrates,” 11)

We see a similar dynamic in the case of other archetypal decadents—Wagnerians, Schopenhauerians, and Christians: a failure of holistic integration, itself a product of underlying decadence or disorder within the self, amounts to a part, promising salvation by extreme suppressive measures, coming to dominate the organism. This process both manifests the

decadence of the organism and comes to reinforce it further. I won't pursue these cases in detail here, but suffice it to say that they hew to same pattern as Socrates in their fundamental decadence.

V. Cultural Decadence as a Structural Failing

Now that we've gotten a key example of what decadence amounts to in the case of the individual, where the relevant whole is the human being, what does it amount to beyond the individual level?

With this quasi-medical understanding of individual decadence in the air, one might assume that when it comes to figuring out whether a culture *as a whole* is decadent, the explanation is to be cast in terms either of the people who populate it or, more derivatively, of the worldviews that enjoy popular support there (and which, like coughing and sneezing, are both symptoms of a disease and responsible for spreading it further to those who are susceptible). On the former view, a culture is decadent because it is populated by many individual decadents. A decadent culture would thus be decadent in the way an obese culture is obese. On the latter view, a culture is decadent because decadent worldviews hold sway there. A culture would thus be decadent in the way that Italy is a Catholic country, or the way in which Northern Europe, according to Max Weber, is infused with the Protestant Ethic. But we should resist these seemingly natural ways of understanding cultural decadence as well. To be sure, decadent worldviews and individuals often are *characteristic* of decadent cultures. But, if used as the sole guide to cultural decadence, they can yield a false positive: A probing health survey or

anthropological study would not settle for Nietzsche the question of whether a culture *itself* is decadent. Renaissance Italy, we must not forget, is one of his recurrent examples of a flourishing culture (TI, “Skirmishes,” 44; AC, 61) but, by the metrics proposed, since it was overwhelmingly a Christian place, it would seem to count as thoroughly decadent.²⁵

Instead of adopting an aggregative understanding of cultural decadence, so that the decadence of a culture as a whole is fundamentally a function of the decadence of its members or of the worldviews that are popular there, we should rather see the relationship between individual and cultural decadence as one of structural microcosm to structural macrocosm. Nietzsche in this respect follows Plato, who in the *Republic* takes there to be an important structural analogy between the organization of the individual soul and the organization of the *kallipolis*.²⁶ In assessing whether a culture is decadent (or, by contrast, flourishing), we should thus be focused on that culture *as a whole*, to be judged in light of *its* unity.

Nietzsche’s most explicit remarks to this effect come relatively early in his career, in the *Untimely Meditations*, where he writes that “[c]ulture is, above all, unity of artistic style in all the expressions of the life of a people.” (UM, I, 1).²⁷ Here Nietzsche is characterizing what a genuine *Kultur* (culture) would amount to, as opposed to the decadent variety (UM, I, 2) that he sees as holding sway in Germany of the 1870s, epitomized in the works of David Strauss and the lives of the barbaric *Bildungsphilister* (cultivated Philistines) who read him.²⁸ Hewing to the basic idea that a failure of unity is responsible for decadence, this “barbarism” he describes as a “lack of style or a chaotic jumble of all styles” (UM, I, 1).²⁹ So the decadent culture is the disunified culture.

But what would it be for the “life expressions” of a people to be stylistically unified in the way that Nietzsche is envisaging? Nietzsche could be interpreted as putting his emphasis on

artistic style manifested *in works of art proper*—paintings, buildings, works of music and the like. On this interpretation, it is *those* life expressions of a people that he is singling out and calling upon to be unified. But this is to put the emphasis on the products of culture rather than on the culture itself. Nietzsche’s idea is instead that the culture is *itself* the object of evaluation. His images for culture are ones that take the whole culture to be akin to a potentially magnificent work of art: it is a “pyramid” (AC, 57); “a great edifice” (GS, 356). His idea, from the *Untimely Meditations* through his late work, seems to be that we can assess whole cultures *as artistic accomplishments*.³⁰ This excellence as works of art is what characterizes the best cultures for Nietzsche, the ones whose excellence he lauds time and again: the Homeric Greek culture, the Roman Empire, and the Italian Renaissance. They are, as he says about Rome, “work[s] of art in the grand style” (AC, 58) whose justification is their own resplendent existence. Nietzsche, as he is so often can be, is tantalizingly vague about the details, but, so far as I can tell, he seems to think that cultures are—*avant la lettre*—massive pieces of performance art, to a large degree unconsciously produced. (He of course didn’t have available the notion of performance art, so the images that he gives tend to be more static...) When cultures become decadent—when they lose the unity that great works of art have—*they* cannot be excellent artistic “objects” (or, more properly perhaps, “events”).³¹

In the case of both individuals and cultures, Nietzsche never endorses the implausible view that *simply* being unified is enough.³² Unity, he suggests, is very important. But it is a necessary and not a sufficient condition; it matters *what is being unified as well*. Exactly what this unity consists in, and just what the others elements are necessary for individual and cultural greatness, are topics I treat at length elsewhere in my dissertation. What matters for the present purposes is this: a decadent individual, and a decadent culture, in lacking unity, lack one of the

most important preconditions for their flourishing. Their decadence fundamentally consists in this detrimental disunity—and the symptoms it brings in tow.

VI. The Unfortunate Legacy of Decadence

In offering the reading that I have, my concern has been to try to rehabilitate the concept of decadence philosophically— to extricate it from Nietzsche’s biologicistic speculation, to elucidate the unusual technical sense in which Nietzsche uses it, and to show that it is more central to Nietzsche’s thought than scholars of Nietzsche have often supposed. But I offer this reading also as a way of trying to rehabilitate the concept historically—and to try to exculpate Nietzsche in doing so. After all, it is just this sort of rhetoric about decadence that the German National Socialists appropriated, or misappropriated, from Nietzsche and made a centerpiece of their program for the “purification” and “salvation” of Germany. (No doubt another reason the concept of decadence is thought by many enlightened readers of Nietzsche to be something that is best ignored...). However, as I shall suggest, rather than playing into the hands of the Nazis, it in fact delivers a telling indictment of them. (Which is not to say that the social philosophy Nietzsche builds around the concept of decadence is one ringed with rosy moral consequences; quite the contrary...)

Nietzsche again and again characterizes decadence in biological terms— as a kind of physiological degeneration. But we should not let this tempt us to the aggregative conclusion that I have been trying to resist: namely that cultural decadence is a problem with there being too many “sickly” or decadent people (or too many of the decadent books they write or too much of the the decadent music they compose) “polluting” the cultural landscape, and, accordingly, that cultural decadence could be remedied by eliminating them.³³

For if we are attentive to the basic structural analogy between individual and cultural decadence that Nietzsche has established, we will see that it is a serious mistake to read Nietzsche in this way. Such a reading would neglect the underlying metaphor of *achieved* unity at the level of the whole that we get from observing the microcosm of the person. After all, on the individual level, Nietzsche praises great individuals for their unity in *multiplicity*—they are something “capable of being as manifold as whole, as ample as full” (BGE, 212). Unity is not uniformity. To seek to extirpate decadent parts is not to transfigure and incorporate them into a cohesive unity, which is fundamentally what genuine achieved unity requires. It’s a good thing, Nietzsche points out, that most Christians don’t live up to their own barbaric advice to “pluck out” the eye that offends them; we no longer, as he says, admire dentists who yank out teeth so that they will not hurt any more. (TI, “Morality,” 1). This extreme desire for “extirpation” or “castration” of a part of the self is fundamentally a degenerate, decadent response, a sign of those who are too “weak-willed” to manage anything else (*ibid.*, 2).

Seen in the light of this analogy to the individual, the Nazis’ “Final Solution”—the plan of exterminating those they took to be decadents and of consigning their books to the flames—was not a route to cultural rejuvenation; it was a telling symptom of their culture’s underlying decadence. The German *Volk*, as Nietzsche presciently stresses, are the ones who are degenerate at core—not the Jews. Excoriating the rising tide of German nationalist anti-Semitism, Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* cleverly turns the Germans’ twisted claim that the Jews are “polluting” their “pure” German blood back on them: the Germans’ desire to live in a country free of Jews is the “instinct of a people whose type is still weak and indefinite, so it could be easily blurred or extinguished by a stronger race. The Jews, however, are beyond any doubt the strongest, toughest, and purest race now living in Europe” (251). They are, as Nietzsche says in *The*

Antichrist, “the antithesis of all decadents.” (AC, 24). As with decadent individuals, the “cure” that decadent cultures seek is a route to further decadence. And so too with the Germans.

The Nazis and the Jews aside, supposing there *are* decadent individuals, as Nietzsche surely thought there were, what can a culture “do” with them? Once we see cultural decadence in the way I have set it out here, we will realize that a culture can flourish *despite* the pervasive decadence of most of its members and *despite* the prevalence of the decadent worldviews they endorse. Indeed, the structural analogy to the individual suggests that if a culture will flourish, it will do so *in virtue* of using the underlying decadence of its members toward some unified project for the good of the whole. We should take our lesson for the macrocosm from the microcosm, most especially from Nietzsche’s favorite example of a person who has overcome his own decadence: namely, *himself*. In his autobiography *Ecce Homo* he writes, “Apart from the fact that I am a decadent, I am also the opposite. My proof for this is, among other things, that I have always instinctively chosen the *right* means against wretched states; while the decadent typically chooses means that are disadvantageous for him.” (EH, “Wise,” 2). Faced with constant, tormenting sickness that would have debilitated many, Nietzsche did not succumb to self-pity. He instead stakes a claim on this seemingly unfortunate aspect of his life, transfiguring it into the route for his philosophical creativity. He says, characteristically, “In the midst of the torments that go with an uninterrupted three day migraine, accompanied by laborious vomiting of phlegm, I possessed a dialectician’s clarity *par excellence* and thought through with very cold blood matters for which under healthier circumstances I am not mountain climber, not subtle, not *cold* enough” (EH, “Wise,” 1).

A flourishing culture, this would suggest, does not try to eliminate decadent individuals; “it” integrates them, putting them in the service of a greater cultural end.³⁴ For whether or not the

decadent members of a culture consciously work to create a culture, they can nonetheless manage to do so. In their individual decadence, they are unwittingly the base on which a flourishing culture can be built. Perhaps they are lugging the stones to build the cathedral or making Michelangelo's pasta. The Italian Renaissance, in one sense, was carried on the back of a few great individuals, the creative artists and daring intellectuals who produced its best works. They made it the rich, creatively fertile time it was. But it was also, we must not forget, built on the "scaffolding" (BGE, 258) of many devoutly Christian *decadents*, the toiling workers whose "slavery" created the material conditions for that artistic and intellectual flowering. Indeed, their decadence in endorsing Christianity may have been essential in coaxing them into the subservient role they needed to play. "A high culture is a pyramid," Nietzsche writes, "it can stand only on a broad base; its first presupposition is a strong and soundly consolidated mediocrity" (AC, 57). On some level despite their individual decadence, and on some level because of it, these "slaves" helped make the Renaissance possible. Their individual contributions were not as indispensable as those of Raphael or Michelangelo. But they were important still. And their highest dignity, Nietzsche thinks, comes in making this contribution:³⁵

Every man, with his whole activity, is only dignified to the extent that he is a tool of genius, consciously or unconsciously; whereupon we immediately deduce the ethical conclusion that the "man as such," the absolute man, possesses neither dignity, nor rights, nor duties: only as a fully determined being, serving unconscious purposes, can man excuse his existence. ³⁶

¹ The few exceptions to the general trend are Daniel Conway, *Nietzsche's Dangerous Game: Philosophy in the Twilight of the Idols*, (Cambridge, 1997) and Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith* (Indiana, 2007). There is only a brief discussion of decadence in: Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (Routledge, 2002), p. 158; John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford, 1996), p. 59; and Lester Hunt, *Nietzsche and the Origin of Virtue*, (Routledge, 1991), p. 126-30. Leiter, as I discuss below, focuses on a symptom of decadence, but does not get to its underlying explanation. Richardson and Hunt, by contrast, rightly note that Nietzsche conceives of decadence as at core a failure of integration, of one kind or another. But both the Richardson and the Hunt interpretations are so invested in seeing Nietzsche as having an axiology that would ground all value in increases of power that they do not, in my opinion, give an adequate account of why decadence is a problem. Their readings would thus have it that the *only* reason decadence is a problem is that leads to a diminution of power. Yet this saddles Nietzsche with an implausible axiology, as I discuss in Chapter 7. On this criticism, see Bernard Reginster, "The Will to Power and the Ethics of Creativity," in *Nietzsche and Morality*, ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu, (Oxford, 2007).

² Nietzsche, it is often thought, takes the term "décadence," which appears in the works of 1888 with the *accent aigu*, from the French theorist Paul Bourget, in particular from the latter's "Théorie de la décadence," a study on the work of Charles Baudelaire. Gregory Moore has cast doubt on Bourget as the original source of the term, pointing out a use of the term (though without the accent) in 1877, before Nietzsche first read Bourget. See Moore's *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor*, (Cambridge, 2002), p. 121. This terminological issue aside, the *concept* of decadence, going under a number of different names, was a preoccupation of Nietzsche's from the very beginning.

³ Months after penning those words from *The Case of Wagner* with which I began, Nietzsche was signing his letters "The Crucified" or "Dionysus," and suggesting to his Turinese landlords the Finos that his humble room be decked out as a frescoed temple since the Italian king and queen would soon pay him a visit. See Lesley Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin*, (Picador, 1996), p. 206. Yet his major works of 1888—*Twilight of the Idols*, *The Case of Wagner*, *The Antichrist*, and *Ecce Homo*—if provocative and often vitriolic, retain the trenchancy characteristic of Nietzsche's thought more generally.

⁴ By my count, he mentions decadence and its cognates over 90 times in the 4 main works of 1888. Some of his most celebrated and (it is often thought) most central ideas—the eternal recurrence, perspectivism, the *Übermensch*, and the death of God—are mentioned far less frequently (if at all) in the final works—and indeed in the corpus more generally. Yet it is these concepts that interpreters tend to fasten on as the key to Nietzsche's thought.

⁵ It can often be difficult to tell how literally Nietzsche means his physiological speculations to be taken. Cp. GM III:15. Here he suggests that the origins of bad conscience, "may perhaps lie in some disease of the *nervus sympathicus*, or in an excessive secretion of bile, or in a deficiency of potassium sulfate and phosphate in the blood, or in an obstruction in the abdomen which impedes the blood circulation, or in the degeneration of the ovaries, and the like."

⁶ For Nietzsche the primary "bearers" of decadence are individuals and cultures. But Nietzsche often uses the term in a more metonymic sense to describe worldviews, as well as the cultural creations animated by these worldviews (e.g., works of art, doctrinal religions, philosophies), which are produced by decadents and attractive to decadents. Wagner's operas and the New Testament are thus decadent in this more derivative sense. It is important to bear this in mind, since we often tend to think of things the other way around: We often think in the first instance of things (e.g., foie gras) or worldviews (e.g., sexual hedonism) as decadent, and the people who are drawn to them as decadent derivatively. This is not, however, how Nietzsche thinks about these things.

⁷ CW, 5: In cases of decadence, “the instincts are weakened. What one ought to shun is found attractive. One puts to one’s lips what drives one yet faster into the abyss. Is an example desired? One only need to observe the regimen that those suffering from anemia or gout or diabetes prescribe for themselves.”

⁸ Nietzsche sometimes seems to think that the predisposition to decadence is a biological characteristic of certain types of people. TI, “Skirmishes,” 36: “Incidentally, however contagious pessimism is, it still does not increase the sickliness [*Krankhaftigkeit*] of an age, of a generation as a whole: it is an expression of this sickliness. One falls victim to it as one falls victim to cholera: one has to be morbid enough in one’s whole predisposition. Pessimism itself does not create a single decadent more...” (By “sickliness,” he must mean *predisposition to illness*, and not the quality of being ill, or the degree to which one is ill. After all, one’s *sickness* can get worse, as he himself appears to suggest.)

⁹ For this reason, Nietzsche does not believe in engaging Wagnerians, Christians, and other types of decadents on their own terms and offering them “reasons” against their views. For to do so, he thinks, is to mistake what one is up against. It is to think one is simply correcting a factual misunderstanding about metaphysics, ethics, or aesthetics instead of facing someone incapacitated by what is, in many respects, a medical condition. As Nietzsche puts it, “...one does not refute a sickness...” (CW, “Postscript”)

¹⁰ The phrase “every style of *decadence*” admits of two readings: (a) The narrower reading is that Nietzsche is just talking about the style of decadence as manifested in artistic forms (painting, music, literature) alone. (b) The broader—and in my opinion, the correct reading, as will be clear in what follows—is that Nietzsche is talking about a stylistic formal defect that decadent things in general share (at least “primary bearers” of decadence, to use my terminology from above).

¹¹ This is my translation of “*Ich halte mich dies Mal nur bei der Frage des Stils auf.*” Walter Kaufmann renders this: “For the present I merely dwell on the question of *style*.” Despite the italics (which are not Nietzsche’s) on “style,” this way of rendering the passage—in particular the “merely”—understates the importance of style to Nietzsche’s account of decadence. It is in formal, structural terms that Nietzsche explains both individual and cultural decadence.

¹² “Disgregation” is a scientific term, referring to the degree to which the molecules in a body are separated from one another.

¹³ As several commentators have noted, this passage is lifted by Nietzsche, with no citation and with only slight modification, from Paul Bourget’s essay “Théorie de la décadence” in his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine: études littéraires*, (Gallimard, 1993), p. 14. See Ernst Betram, *Nietzsche: Versuch einer Mythologie* (Bondi, 1918), p. 231; Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, (Princeton, 1950), p. 73; Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, (Cambridge, 2002), p. 120. (My thanks to Chris Sykes for first drawing my attention to this.) Bourget writes, for example, “Si l’énergie des cellules devient indépendante, les organismes qui composent l’organisme total cessent pareillement de subordonner leur énergie à l’énergie totale, et l’anarchie qui s’établit constitue la décadence de l’ensemble” and “Un style de décadence est celui où l’unité du livre se décompose pour laisser la place à l’indépendance de la phrase, et la phrase pour laisser la place à l’indépendance du mot,” p. 14. [If the energy of the cells becomes independent, the organisms which compose the total organism likewise cease to subordinate their energy to the total energy, and the anarchy that gets established constitutes the decadence of the whole / A style of decadence is one where the unity of the book decomposes, ceding its place to the independence of the sentence, and the sentence ceding its place to the independence of the word.] (Translation mine.)

¹⁴ See, in particular, GS, 290 on the individual and UMI, 1 on the culture. Nietzsche’s account of decadence is a further elaboration of points he has made elsewhere.

¹⁵ The term “organic unity” may be misleading in this context. Nietzsche in this passage is thinking of organic unity in a more classical sense, rather than in the Moorean sense that may be more familiar in contemporary philosophy. (See G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, esp. §18). The latter Moorean view is a kind of axiological holism according to which the value had by the whole needn’t simply be the sum of the values of the parts; Nietzsche’s view is instead the statement of an *ideal*: that it is of prime importance for a relevant whole (a person, a culture) to be integrated. (As I discussed in Chapter 3, I think that Nietzsche is *also* committed to axiological holism of a certain kind, but that is not evident from this passage, nor is it of direct relevance to the general characterization of decadence.)

¹⁶ Now notice this does not mean that, to continue with Nietzsche’s analogy, no sentence can stand out from the others and be better. (Such a lack of “rank-ordering” would no doubt be repellent to Nietzsche!) Some sentences can be more elegant or more incisive than others, and this is fine, so long as this excellence contributes to—rather than detracts from—the value of the whole. To switch to another artistic analogy, there’s nothing wrong with individually great actors, or even with some actors being better than others; the problem is with domineering divas, unwilling to work in an ensemble, who steal the limelight and ruin the whole play.

¹⁷ Leiter rightly notes that Nietzsche takes decadent individuals to be those who, characteristically, have lost their instincts and want what is worst for them (AC, 6), *op. cit.*, p. 158. But this is a *sign* of decadence, not its underlying explanation. Its basic explanation, as I spell out in what follows, is a lack of unity in the self.

¹⁸ Cf. Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁹ Cf. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, where he excoriates himself for virtually everything, including (what one presumes) are his wet dreams. Book X, § 30, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin, 1961).

²⁰ “Superfötation” is Nietzsche’s word here. It is in the spirit of the rest of the section that Kaufmann renders it as “hypertrophied,” but this is not actually its scientific meaning. It refers to the condition when a female species is pregnant with multiple fetuses at different stages of development.

²¹ Though Nietzsche takes Socrates to task, Socrates would seem on some level actually seems to be doing just what Nietzsche recommends, spiritualizing or deifying a craving, rather than trying to “castrate” it—which Nietzsche takes to be the typical Christian solution. (See TI, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 1-2). He takes his agonistic and erotic impulses (of the sort, as Nietzsche says, that would be more healthily discharged in a “wrestling match between young men and youths”) and presses them into the service of a respectable rational activity suited to his overgrown logical faculty—dialectical argument (TI, “Socrates,” 8). But maybe the issue for Nietzsche is that Socrates doesn’t *acknowledge* these bodily impulses as part of what he fundamentally is. By Socrates’ lights, *he* is his rational, eternal soul; the body, with its unruly appetites, is just a temporary residence. See Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, (Berkeley, 1998), “By giving [reason] absolute preeminence, Socrates convinced us not to think we comprise many things, all of them equally part of what we are. Instead, he persuaded us to identify ourselves with this one impulse, to consider it the seat of the self, the mark of the human, and to distrust everything else about us as lower, degenerate, as features simply of the body or our fallen nature,” p. 139.

²² Nietzsche implies as much in TI, “Socrates,” 8.

²³ Contrary to the popular canard, this does not make Nietzsche an irrationalist. What he objects to is not rational thinking as such—who but an idiot would object to that?—but to the life-slandering end to which this deification of rationality is put.

²⁴ Nietzsche in this passage uses “instinct” [*Instinkt*] in both its singular and its plural form, two times each. He is not always consistent with his terminology, but in this context, “instinct” and “instincts” are not the same: “Instincts” are animalistic drives (though shaped as well by one’s social context). “Instinct” is being able to act in a way that comes as second nature. Instinct, for Nietzsche, is something one develops or achieves through painstaking work. (Cp. BGE, 188)

²⁵ One could try to press the “worldview” line with the argument that the worldview really animating the Italian Renaissance was one that was subtly moving away from the otherworldliness of Christianity and toward more sensuous, worldly values exemplified in the great art of the time (think, for example, of Michelangelo’s muscular nudes). Nietzsche suggests as much himself about the worldview of Renaissance Italy in *The Antichrist* (61). But to describe this as the dominant worldview of the Italian Renaissance strikes me as almost as perverse as to describe the dominant one in the U.S. as secular. It seems highly unlikely that the average person during the Renaissance was inspired with this worldview.

²⁶ e.g., *Republic* 434d to 435a.

²⁷ Note that Nietzsche uses “culture” both as a unvalorized sociological term and as a kind of valorized ‘success term’; a decadent culture (in the sociological sense) is one that fails to be a genuine culture (in the ‘success term’ sense).

²⁸ Though Nietzsche had not yet started using the term “d cadence,” the idea is the same.

²⁹ UM II, 4: “The culture of a people as the antithesis to this barbarism was once, and I think with a certain justice defined as unity of artistic style in all the expressions of the life of a people; this definition should not be misunderstood in the sense of implying an antithesis between barbarism and *fine* style; what is meant is that a people to whom one attributes a culture has to be in all reality a single living unity and not fall wretchedly apart into inner and outer, content and form. He who wants to strive for and promote the culture of a people should strive for and promote this higher unity and join in the destruction of modern bogus cultivatedness for the sake of a true culture...”

³⁰ This is another respect in which the individual life and the culture are microcosm to macrocosm. The ideal of life for Nietzsche is turning one’s life into a work of art. See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, (Harvard, 1985), esp. Ch. 6; Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche on Art*, (Routledge, 2007), esp. 84-88.

³¹ This may conflict with the sensibilities of some nowadays about what is required for a great work of art. Although most of us regard unity as important, some might think it is not completely obvious that the lack of integration precludes something from being a great work of art. But Nietzsche himself is more classical in his tastes in prizing unity as of indispensable importance.

³² UM I, 2. In the case of individuals too, Nietzsche takes unity to be a necessary condition for flourishing, but not a sufficient one. See BGE, 290.

³³ Sometimes Nietzsche can give us another impression. In a passage entitled “*Morality for Physicians*,” (TI, “Skirmishes,” 36) he writes: “The sick man is a parasite of society. In a certain state it is indecent to live longer. To go on vegetating in cowardly dependence on physicians and machinations, after the meaning of life, the right to life, has been lost, that ought to prompt a profound contempt in society. The physicians, in turn, would have to be the mediators of this contempt—not prescriptions, but every day a new dose of nausea with their patients. To create a new responsibility, that of the physician, for all cases in which the highest interest of life, of ascending life, demands the inconsiderate pushing down and aside of degenerating life—for example, for the right of procreation, the right to be born, the right to live.” [This has not been truncated; the sentence just ends in this fragmentary way.] This is shocking, but it is important to note that he goes on immediately to add in the next paragraph: “To die proudly when it is no longer possible to live proudly. Death freely chosen, death at the right time, brightly and cheerfully accomplished amid children and witnesses: then a real farewell is possible...” For “[w]hen does away with oneself, one does the most estimable thing possible: one almost earns the right to live. Society—what am I saying—life itself derives more advantage from this than from any “life” of renunciation, anemia, and other virtues: one has liberated others from one’s sight; one has liberated life from an objection.” Notice, however, it is a “death freely chosen,” not imposed on one by society. His only *explicit* advice to the physician is to administer “a new dose of nausea” to goad the patients along.

³⁴ This is not to attribute a strong sense of agency to the culture here, as if the culture “chooses” to use the people in this way. The view is instead that, when viewed in a certain light, what certain people do can be seen to be in the service of their culture. As I read Nietzsche, this actually is not a point of disanalogy with the individual case: individuals are “free,” on his understanding of freedom, not in virtue of their capacity to make causally-undetermined choices (to be, as it were, the homunculus in the command center), but in virtue of becoming an integrated “totality” or “unity.” Freedom, in Nietzsche’s sense, is an achievement on the part of the exemplary few.

³⁵ Even as mere objects for the great individual’s contempt, the mass of decadent mediocrity, in Nietzsche’s eyes, play an essential part. For it is only through the “pathos of distance”—by having many people he can regard as beneath him—that a great individual can accomplish anything. (BGE, 257). (Could Nietzsche have written such interesting books if there were no decadents at whom to fling his venom?). Yet note what Nietzsche says in *The Antichrist*, “It would be completely unworthy of a more profound spirit to consider mediocrity as such an objection. In fact, it is the very *first* necessity if there are to be exceptions: a high culture depends on it. When the exceptional human being treats the mediocre more tenderly than himself and his peers, this is not mere politeness of the heart—it is simply his *duty*” (AC, 57).

³⁶ This is from Nietzsche’s unpublished essay, “The Greek State,” trans. Carol Diethe.